



## Decision of the Accreditation Commission of AQAS

on the Bachelor and the Master programme:

**History** (B.A./M.A.)

and on the PhD-programme:

**History**

**offered by Sultan Qaboos University, Oman**

**Based on the report of the expert panel and the discussions of the Accreditation Commission in its 74<sup>th</sup> meeting on 25/26 February 2019, the Accreditation Commission decides:**

1. The study programmes “History” (B.A. and M.A.) offered by Sultan Qaboos University in Oman are accredited according to the AQAS criteria for Programme Accreditation.

The accreditation is conditional.

The study programmes essentially comply with the requirements defined by the criteria and thus the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in their current version. The required adjustments can be implemented within a time period of nine months.

2. The conditions have to be fulfilled. The fulfilment of the conditions has to be documented and reported to AQAS no later than **31. December 2019**.
3. The accreditation is given for the period of **six years** and is valid until **30. September 2025**.

### Conditions:

1. A concept must be provided on how stakeholders and future employers are to be involved in the design and review of the programmes offered, especially the BA and MA.
2. A system must be put in place where data is objectively gathered and systematically evaluated and taken into account for the future enhancement of the doctoral programme.
3. Course descriptions must be revised: subject-specific and cross-disciplinary intended learning outcomes must be described in more detail so that their appropriateness can be checked by stakeholders. Bibliographies of the literature attached to course descriptions should be updated with a greater focus on recent publications, especially those written in English.
4. A process must be implemented to ensure that intended learning outcomes are updated according to current developments in the academic field and labour market.

5. The profile of the MA programme needs to be sharpened. A closer focus is needed in one or more areas of specialization with a clear curriculum of courses building up on one another.
6. The university needs to restructure and revise the information for admittance to the BA, MA and especially the PhD programme so that interested students know beforehand which criteria must be fulfilled to enter the programmes.

The following **recommendations** are given for further improvement of the programmes:

1. The Department should develop initiatives to ensure students' participation in the course and faculty evaluation activities (e.g. reflection in teaching sessions, participation in evaluation activities as a prerequisite for graduation). The results of evaluations and QA measures should be shared with stakeholders.
2. Students should be encouraged to create their own profiles by selecting courses from a pool of electives in order to deepen their knowledge on a specific historical epoch.
3. Students should be able to select "minor programmes" offered by departments in other colleges (e.g. law, economics) to widen the topics of research and to strengthen competencies which could be attractive for the labour market.
4. In order to strengthen the aspects of up-to date research and methodology the MA programme should also admit students from other fields of studies and encourage international students to come to SQU. In this context, a stronger linkage with the Center of Omani Studies at SQU is recommended. Also, the important pre-Islamic era should be included in the curriculum.
5. Students should be involved to a larger extent into different activities of teaching and research.
6. The language competencies of students in English should be strengthened on all levels. English should be utilized more in teaching courses but also students should be encouraged to use English literature and sources for their Master theses.
7. The Department should develop a concept how to strengthen the interlinkage with the labour market and provide descriptions of potential areas of employment (beside Ministries) to the students.
8. New and different types of methodological training should be introduced in the MA lectures to distinguish more clearly between the competencies students can gain on the BA and MA level.
9. A table which helps students and universities abroad to align the national credit point system with the European ECTS systems should be introduced.
10. A document which students receive on graduation which gives detailed information on the target of the study programme as well as on all competencies the student got during his/her studies (e.g. Diploma Supplement) should be introduced.
11. Measures should be taken to ensure that research in the Department of History takes place on a high level in the future (e.g. introducing an incentive system, increasing financial and logistic support, establishing research groups).
12. Continuing staff development opportunities, especially to further develop didactic qualifications should be offered for all academic staff and faculty.
13. An alumni unit or programme needs to be established at large.

With regard to the reasons for this decision the Accreditation Commission refers to the attached assessment report.

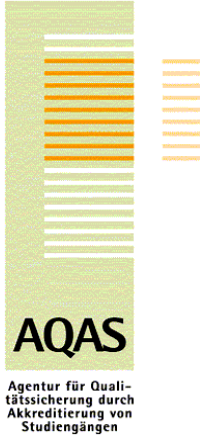
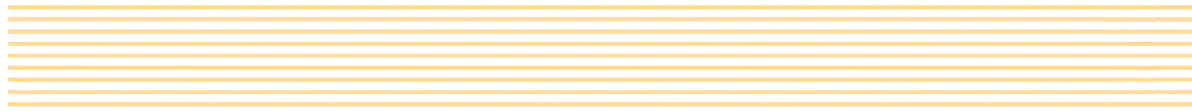
#### **For the PhD-Programme History:**

1. The accreditation decision for the study programme “History” (PhD) offered by Sultan Qaboos University is postponed. The study programme does not yet fulfil all Standards for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) in their current version. However, it is likely that the shortcomings can be remedied within 18 months.
2. The postponement period lasts for a maximum of 18 months and ends on **30. August 2020**. The university has the opportunity to revise the study programme during this period.
3. The revised documentation will be reviewed by the expert panel. If considered necessary by the expert panel, a second site visit has to be organised. The accreditation commission then takes a final decision based on the expert panel’s updated report.
4. The accreditation commission points out that the university must request to continue the accreditation procedure in written form within the given period. The revised documentation must be submitted in writing no later than the **30. August 2020**. If the university does not request the continuation of the accreditation procedure or does not hand in the revised documentation within the given period, AQAS will automatically reopen the procedure and deny the accreditation.

#### **Findings:**

Some of the above named conditions and recommendations which refer to all programmes offered by the Department of History (module descriptions etc.) also include areas of improvement of the PhD programme “History”. Specific for this programme are only the following aspects:

1. A thorough review of the doctoral programme aims and quality criteria must be conducted with the objective to develop a clear policy and quality administration set-up. A system must be put in place where data is objectively gathered and systematically evaluated and taken into account for the future enhancement of the doctoral programme.
2. The PhD programme must be revised (structure, courses and methodological training).
3. A colloquium to ensure a platform for PhD students to present and discuss their research projects has to be established.
4. PhD students should be encouraged to publish their dissertation in English or at least to present a ten-page summary in English to ensure international receptivity.



## **Experts' Report**

on the Bachelor and the Master programme:

**History** (B.A. and M.A.)

and on the PhD-programme:

**History**

**offered by Sultan Qaboos University, Oman**

Visit to the University: 30<sup>th</sup> of October to 1<sup>st</sup> of November, 2018

### **Panel of Experts:**

<b>Prof. Dr. Schirin Hildegard Fathi</b>	University of Hamburg, Germany
<b>Prof. Dr. Hani Hayajneh</b>	Yarmouk University, Irbid, Jordan
<b>Ahmed Al Muhkain</b>	Oman (representative of the labour market)
<b>Leonhard Lietz</b>	University of Wuppertal, Germany (student representative)

### **Coordinators:**

Doris Herrmann, Ronny Heintze	AQAS, Cologne, Germany
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## I. Preamble

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AQAS – Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes – is an independent non-profit organisation, supported by more than 90 member institutions, both higher education institutions (HEIs) and academic associations. Since 2002, the agency has been accredited by the German Accreditation Council (GAC). It is therefore a notified body for accreditation of higher education institutions and programmes in Germany.

AQAS is a full member of ENQA and also listed in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) which confirms that our procedures comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), on which all Bologna countries agreed as a basis for internal and external quality assurance.

AQAS is an institution founded by and working for higher education institutions and academic associations. The agency is devoted to quality assurance and quality development of both academic studies and teaching in higher education institutions. The activities of AQAS in accreditation are neither restrained to specific academic disciplines or degrees nor to a certain type of higher education institution.

In recent years many higher education institutions and research have set up doctoral programmes (PhD-programmes) in order to boost the structured qualification of early stage researchers by providing support and guidance on a range of levels i.e. subject-specific, organisational, intellectual and/or financial.

## II. Accreditation procedure

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This report results from the external review of the Bachelor, Master and PhD-programmes in “History” offered by Sultan Qaboos University in Oman.

### 1. Criteria

The Bachelor and the Master programme is assessed against a set of **criteria for programme accreditation** developed by AQAS. The criteria are based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) 2015. To facilitate the review each criterion features a set of indicators that can be used to demonstrate the fulfilment of the criteria. However, if single indicators are not fulfilled this does not automatically mean that a criterion is not met. The indicators need to be discussed in the context of the programme since not all indicators necessarily can be applied to a programme.

The PhD-programme is assessed against the AQAS **criteria for the accreditation of structured doctoral programmes**. The accreditation by AQAS is based on the following key concepts:

- The doctoral thesis is an independent, original academic piece of research. It can take the form of a monograph or a cumulative dissertation. The assessment of the originality is based on a set of criteria:
  - selection of the research topic,
  - formulation and development of questions around the research topic,
  - decision regarding the use of suitable methodological tools and methods,
  - the scientific research, and
  - the discussion and publication of research results.

- Doctoral programmes should foster subject-specific knowledge and, if possible, facilitate cross-disciplinary perspectives and inter-disciplinary exchanges.
- Doctoral programmes are carried out and completed within a specific timeframe.

The panel of experts was asked to assess the programmes on the basis of the relevant criteria and discuss the programmes separately, when needed.

## **2. Approach and methodology**

### *The initialisation*

The University mandated AQAS to perform the accreditation procedure in May 2016. The University produced a Self Evaluation Report (SER) which describes all three programmes (Bachelor, Master and PhD). In January 2018, the institution handed in a draft of the SER together with the relevant documentation of the study programmes and appendices.

The appendices included e.g.:

- Course Syllabi for the Bachelor and Master programme
- Academic regulations for Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes.
- CVs and Publications of teaching staff
- List of completed MA Theses
- Academic programme review policies
- Course Teaching Survey

AQAS checked the SER regarding completeness, comprehensibility and transparency.

The accreditation procedure was officially initialised by a decision of the AQAS Accreditation Commission on 14/15 May 2018. The final version of the SER was handed in at the beginning of July 2018.

### *The nomination of the panel of expert*

The composition of the panel of experts follows the stakeholder principle. Consequently, representatives from the respective discipline/s, the labour market and students are involved. Furthermore, AQAS follows principles for the selection of experts of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA).

The Accreditation Commission nominated in July 2018 the above mentioned expert panel. AQAS informed the University about the members of the expert panel and the University did not raise any concerns against the composition of the panel.

### *The preparation of the site visit*

Prior to the site visit, the experts reviewed the SER and submitted a short preliminary statement including open questions and potential needs for additional information. AQAS forwarded these preliminary statements to the University and the panel members in order to increase transparency in the process and the upcoming discussions during the site visit.

### *The site visit*

After a review of the Self Evaluation Report, a site visit to the University took place from 30<sup>th</sup> of October to 1<sup>st</sup> of November, 2018. On site, the experts interviewed different stakeholders, e.g. the management of the HEI, the programme management, teaching and other staff, representatives

from the labour market as well as students and graduates, in separate discussions and consulted additional documentation as well as student work. The visit concluded with the presentation of the preliminary findings by the group of experts to the University's representatives.

#### *The report writing*

Following the site visit, the expert group drafted the following report, assessing the fulfilment of the AQAS criteria for programme accreditation and doctoral programmes. The report included a recommendation to the Accreditation Commission. The report was sent to the University for comments.

#### *The decision*

The report, together with the comments of the department, forms the basis for the AQAS Accreditation Commission to make a decision regarding the accreditation of the three programmes. Based on these two documents, on 25/26 February 2019 the Accreditation Commission discussed the programmes at SQU and took its decision on the accreditation. AQAS forwarded the decision to the University. The University had the right to appeal against the decision or any of the imposed conditions.

In April 2019, AQAS published the report and the result of the accreditation as well as the names of the panel of experts.

### **III. General Information on the University**

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The education system in Oman is divided into three main levels: preschool, school and higher education. School education consists of twelve years of formal study. After completing grade twelve in the school level, a student can join one of the higher education institutions by applying to the Higher Education Admission Centre (HEAC), which is responsible for ensuring that students receive fair treatment and are given the best available opportunities based on their preferences and achievement in high school.

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) is the largest higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman. It aims to take a direct and effective role in the social and economic development plans for the Omani society by contributing to the development of its productive capabilities and the best use of its resources. While the construction of SQU started in 1982, the first students were enrolled in 1986.

The University commenced with five colleges: Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture, Education and Science. Furthermore, the College of Arts and Social Sciences was established in 1987, followed by the College of Economics and Political Sciences, the College of Law and the College of Nursing. The nine University colleges currently offer 63 undergraduate programmes, 62 Master and 34 PhD programmes.

SQU has implemented nine support centers: Centre for Community Service & Continuing Education (CCSCE), Center for Information System (CIS), Center for Educational Technology (CET), Center for Staff Development (CSD), Center for Preparatory Studies (CPS), Center for Career Guidance (CCG), Student Counselling Center (SCC), Independent learning Center (ILC), Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (ETL). Moreover ten research centers exist at SQU, one of them is the Humanities Research Center (HRC).

#### *Employability*

The Centre for Career Guidance (CCG) has been established to guide students to plan their career paths successfully, develop links with different labour sectors and build connections with its

alumni. The CCG organizes workshops, seminars and training courses to develop students' knowledge to enable them to identify, assess and understand their competencies, interests, personal characteristics, career choices and the job market. In this regard CCG organises the annual employment fair to allow employers to get into contact with students and graduates of SQU.

CASS students can gain experience by undertaking internships, executing training, final year projects and participation in extra-curriculum activities such as students' group events, community service, student specialization fairs, and on-campus employment. According to SER, the majority of CASS academic programmes have adjusted their curricula to include training programmes. Moreover, CASS has organized annual Training Fairs with stakeholders from private and government sectors to perform the quality of training. CASS has also started a programme to strengthen links with alumni.

Established in 1987, the College of Arts and Social Sciences (CASS) is one of nine colleges at SQU. The College is comprised of 12 departments which offer 11 Bachelor programmes, 9 Master programmes and 3 PhD programmes. History was affiliated with the Geography Department. Following the establishment of the new building for the College of Arts and Social Sciences in 1993, History was relocated to become a fully-fledged academic department in the newly established college. The Department launched the Master programme in 2001 and the PhD programme in 2011.

Standard PhD programme:

*The institution is entitled to award a doctorate.*

### **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU is the only national State University in the Sultanate of Oman (SQU) and is entitled to offer PhD programmes.

## **IV. Assessment of the study programme(s)**

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### **1. Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance**

Standards BA/MA programme:

*The programme is subject to the higher education institution's policy and associated procedures for quality assurance, including procedures for the design, approval, monitoring, and revision of the programmes.*

*A quality-oriented culture, focusing on continuous quality enhancement, is in place. This includes regular feedback mechanisms involving both internal and external stakeholders.*

*The strategy, policies, and procedures have a formal status and are made available in published form to all those concerned. They also include roles for students and other stakeholders. [ESG 1.1]*

Standards PhD programme:

*The results of the internal quality assurance management are taken into account for the further development of the doctoral programme.*

### **Description**

**Sultan Qaboos University** has established a significant number of processes to assure quality in all SQU's activities. Some of the SQU Colleges have already gone through international accreditation processes. The SQU administration has recognized the importance of having a central quality office to coordinate efforts towards achieving quality in all processes in the University.



Therefore, the Quality Assurance Office (QAO) was established in 2010. Moreover, decentralised offices for QA on college level have been implemented in the last years.

According to the SER all stakeholders are involved in quality assurance in the University. Students' involvement is implemented, e.g. by their participation in the Student Advisory Council and the Student Liaison Committee.

The **College of Arts and Social Sciences** developed quality indicators and practices to address its unique institutional needs and relevance within the Omani higher education context. In October 2011, the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Committee (QAAC) was formed. QAAC comprises representatives from all academic programmes in CASS under the direct supervision of the Dean. The QAAC has a permanent office, rapporteur and staff to execute duties and follow-up administrative tasks.

There are several initiatives for student involvement: in 2015 SQU established the first advisory council with the aim of providing students with more space for engagement so they can express their ideas, concerns, and suggestions to a higher management level at SQU and colleges. The candidates for the advisory council are elected by their own colleagues in a democratic process. There is a Student Liaison Committee in which students are able to express their ideas and concerns.

On the level of the **Department of History** an Accreditation and Quality Assurance Committee was formed in 2013. The committee's main functions are for example to promote quality culture in the Department. Student Course Evaluation is one of the most important tools for QA, but according to the SER the surveys are mostly invalid due to the insufficient number of students participating in the evaluation. History students can regularly visit the HoD for any academic matters, requests, etc. The Department of History points out in its SER that it intends to maintain contact with its graduates. It is in the process of designing and distributing an alumni feedback survey.

In 2006, the Department of History conducted an external programme review by a scientist from Jordanian University. Strengths and recommendations are summarized in the SER and the Department has taken some actions to implement the suggestions for improvement, e. g. the contents of some course were upgraded, each course requests a number of textbooks and in-house materials for teaching and faculty encourage students to read from external sources.

Faculty research is supported through grants and SQU provides financial support for each faculty member to present in international conferences.

The Department of History follows a number of approaches for coordinating, monitoring, and assuring quality of the undergraduate programme with a focus on following areas: Teaching (Students' Courses and Teaching Survey), Students (Academic Advising, Students' Liaison Committee), research and performance as well as community service (Appraisal of Academic Staff). A meeting of the Department Board which includes the entire faculty is held each semester and headed by the HoD of the Department of History. Meetings of the Department's committees are held regularly based on specific needs. Moreover, meetings of the Department's HoD with the Department committees are held based on requests and specific events.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

On a positive note, responsibilities and expectations within the programme and programme elements are clearly defined and available to students. Moreover, curriculum documentation is up-to-date and updated regularly, with clearly defined expectations. Meeting with students confirmed clarity of expectations and BA course schedule. However, this is not the case with MA or PhD programmes.

Although there are measures for QA on Department level planned, there is no comprehensive quality assurance system in place at this moment. As indicated above, the department has embarked on an ambitious quality assurance project. Moreover, currently, partial course and faculty evaluations are conducted. However, they exhibit a low response rate, most probably due to being non-mandatory for completion of modules or graduation. The site visit showed mixed views on the level of students' involvement in QA procedures. It is not clear whether evaluation results are shared with teaching staff and students alike.

The labour market, on the other hand, is not involved in the quality-assurance procedure for the programme. This could be due to the fact the Ministry of Education is the main employer of most of the BA and MA graduates. However, due to the rise of unemployment among graduates, and in response to a national employment drive, a few committees have been set up recently, which involve some stakeholders or potential employers. It is premature to assess the efficacy of this new mechanism.

Experiences from student advisory bodies, groups or alumni groups are not usually used for the enhancement of the programme, perhaps due to the lack of standard or systematic mechanisms to involve alumni. Most interactions so far have been individual in nature and to varying degrees. As a result, career progression of graduates from the BA and MA programmes is partially, though not systematically, captured at the SQU level, and data on alumni experiences seem not to be considered during past developments of these two programmes. Students and alumni should be encouraged to contribute to curricular development and should be more strongly involved in quality assurance.

As far as the doctoral programme is concerned, the responsibilities for the administration and the Quality Assurance are not clearly defined in the provided documentation. The site visit indicated that while the doctoral programme was introduced in 2011, it still lacks consistency in administration and clarity in its aims and outcomes. Perhaps because of the small number of PhD students (26) and graduates (7), no evidence has been found to suggest that data is gathered regarding the achievement of the formulated aims of the doctoral programme. Moreover, the information in the SER does not give evidence if research methods and data assessment comply with accepted academic standards (see below). However, the award of the doctorate degree is usually accorded through the concluding defence of the research thesis.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the criteria pertaining to the Policy and Procedures for Quality Assurance are partly fulfilled. The following areas need to be remedied:

1. A more rigorous mechanism to involve stakeholders and future employers in the design and review of the programmes offered, especially the BA and MA. There is a need to ensure that skills and contents provided by the department are well received and utilised by the students and useful for the labour market. Outcomes of the QA procedures should be summarized and shared with the stakeholders. **[Finding 1]**
2. Alternative methods should be contemplated to ensure students' participation in the course and faculty evaluation activities. For example, one of the lectures or teaching sessions could be dedicated to reflect on each course or the entire degree programme. This could be complemented by a survey or making participation in evaluation activities a prerequisite before students get to know their grades. **[Finding 2]**
3. A thorough review of the doctoral programme aims and quality criteria must be conducted with the objective to develop a clear policy and quality administration set-up. A system must

be put in place where data is objectively gathered and systematically evaluated and taken into account for the future enhancement of the doctoral programme. **[Finding 3]**

## 2. Quality of the Curriculum

### Standards BA/MA programme:

*The intended learning outcomes of the programme are defined and available in published form. They reflect both academic and labour-market requirements and are up-to-date with relation to the relevant field. The design of the programme supports achievement of the intended learning outcomes.*

*The academic level of graduates corresponds to the requirements of the appropriate level of the European Qualifications Framework.*

*The curriculum's design is readily available and transparently formulated. [ESG1.2]*

### Standards PhD programme:

*The institution defines the aims of the doctoral programme.*

*The doctoral programme is aligned with the aims of the defined qualification.*

*The doctoral theses provide evidence that the appropriate level on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) or the respective level on the national qualifications framework for the award of Higher Education degrees have been achieved.*

*Doctoral programmes are structured in such a way - with regards to the research content and the required time - that students are enabled to progress efficiently through all stages of their research and achieve their doctorate within an appropriate timescale.*

## Description

SQU recently published the graduate attributes and a policy for new undergraduate academic programmes. The attainment of the attributes is measured through the assessment of students as well as feedback from graduates and employers. The new undergraduate academic programmes policy requires information on teaching strategies, programme evaluations and review techniques and anticipated employment destinations, in addition to programme objectives, learning outcomes, content, learning resources, local stakeholders' support letters and international benchmarking.

### *Targets of the programmes*

SQU included an overview in the SER which shows the matching between the mission statement of the University, the targets of CASS and the goals of the Department of History. The Department of History aims to achieve the following objectives in teaching, research and community service:

- To prepare a generation of specialists in various areas of history with outstanding expertise in their field of specialization.
- To provide academic orientation for a generation of researchers in the areas of research and historical studies in order to promote wider understanding of Oman's status in human civilization.
- To develop students' research capabilities through participation in seminars, conferences and workshops conducted by concerned ministries.

### *Bachelor Programme*

Students enrolled in CASS must successfully complete common core general education requirements. Undergraduate students must satisfy first the Foundation Programme (FP) requirements before enrolling in their degree programme, and have the option to graduate with a major or a

combination of a major and a minor or a major with specialization. The range of courses reaches from Arabic language, Oman and Islamic Civilization, to Information Technology and Critical Thinking and Problem Solving.

According to the SER the BA programme aims to provide an outstanding historical knowledge and understanding of ancient, Islamic and modern history; and aspires to be a distinguished programme in the region. Learning outcomes are:

- 1: Graduates will work in relevant educational and research institutions, observing the ideals, values and professional and social principles of the society in which they live.
- 2: Graduates will critically assess and analyze information in sources and Web sites.
- 3: Graduates will interpret and edit different texts such as manuscripts and archives.
- 4: Graduates will respect information privacy especially secret historical texts.
- 5: Graduates will learn how to communicate effectively, think critically and creatively, solve problems and work in teams in organizing research projects.

To graduate, a student in in BA of History is required to complete 120 credit hours:

Bachelor	Foundation Programme	University Requirements	University Electives	College Requirements	College Electives	Departmental Requirements	Departmental Electives	Major Requirements	Major Electives	Specialization Requirements	Specialization Electives	Minor Requirements	Minor Electives	Total credit hours
History	Non Credit	6	6	17	3	0	0	58	6	0	0	21	3	120

The Bachelor study programme went through five revisions between 1987 and 2014. In 1999, the BA programme introduced the major/minor track. Minors can be among others: Arabic Language or Geography, Tourism, Mass Media, Sociology or Social Work.

### *Master Programme*

According to the SER, the programme in history aims through excellence in research to provide rich information in history and historical methodology in order to be a leading department in historical research. The programme's mission is to:

- (1) produce qualified researchers in different fields of history,
- (2) train capable postgraduate directors of historical research centres and departments, and
- (3) produce researchers able to keep up with modern and contemporary issues of world history.

Through the courses, the programme aims to provide the candidates with theoretical and methodological skills enabling them to qualify for a PhD. The thesis is normally based on data produced through fieldwork in the country, carried out between the first and second year of study.

Students must complete the required 12 credits of course work in addition to a thesis. The student should complete the course work requirements specified in the degree plan with a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.00. For the thesis, the candidate is required to conduct the necessary literature review, undertake the research, analyse the results, write the report and communicate the results at an oral defence. This work need not necessarily be original research, but should employ new application of ideas. The student should identify the research problem in consultation with the

supervisor, which normally takes place in the second semester. The student should register for the thesis in the third semester after having completed at least 12 credits of the course work.

Course Code	Master Course Title	Credits
HIST6330	Special topic in the Arab-Islamic civilization	3
HIST7430	Special topic in modern and contemporary history	3
HIST6110	Historical sources and references	3
HIST6320	Documentary Historical Studies	3
HIST6530	Historical texts in English	3
HIST6540	Historical Research Methodology	3
HIST6550	Studies in economic and social history	3
HIST6560	Sources of Omani History	3
HIST7100	MA thesis	
Total		24

### *Research*

According to the SER, SQU gives the opportunity to faculty to apply for research funds. Funding – coming from different sources - is provided for research projects that are expected to lead to original findings and innovative discoveries.

### *PhD Programme*

As explained in the SER, the Department of History aims through its PhD programme to promote the use of modern research methods in the study of history which will prepare outstanding graduates equipped with the knowledge and competence necessary to provide concerned institutions with PhD holders needed to advance the Omani and Gulf communities.

In addition to the academic importance, the reasons for establishing the PhD programme refer to the following aspects: A) absence of a PhD programme in history in the Sultanate of Oman. B) the growing need in public and private institutions as well as universities and research centres for academics specialized in research, teaching and consultation. C) the demands by holders of the Master degree in history who wish to continue their postgraduate studies in the Sultanate rather than abroad, which comes with a significant financial burden. D) providing students with the necessary and up-to-date knowledge in their specific specialization.

Learning outcomes of the PhD programme are according to the SER:

1. Graduates will have the ability to work in various institutions concerned with knowledge of history and culture as well as modern research.
2. Graduates will help in the development of Omani and Arab societies by linking postgraduate studies in history to the heritage of Omani and Arab society. Graduates will be aware of the history and heritage of their home land and their role in human civilization.

Doctoral candidates are required to produce a thesis containing original work of suitable merit to demonstrate their command of the relevant research methodology and their ability to undertake independent research. The thesis should make a contribution to the knowledge in history, as demonstrated by at least one paper being published or accepted for publication in an international, specialized, refereed journal. The student should identify the research problem in consultation with the supervisor.

During the site visit the panel of experts was informed that the PhD programme was suspended till 2019 due to changes in teaching staff and therefore a lack of supervisors.

## **Experts' Evaluation**

### *Bachelor Programme*

The BA programme under review is sound and solid. It provides students with general competences in history, and knowledge and understanding of the history of Islam in particular. Other subjects related to other parts of the world are covered. In order to broaden students' perspectives and to follow comparable programmes in the Arab area the curriculum has been enriched with modules related to the history of Oman.

The implementation of the study programme is based on an appropriate infrastructure and a good organisation. The current structure appropriately covers topics that would be expected in a BA and the general course outlines are also appropriate. The curricular concept of the programme is well planned thoroughly and executed properly, although the description of certain courses should be reviewed and polished. The panel of experts has no doubts that the objectives can be reached with the structure and that the academic degree awarded to graduates corresponds to the requirements of the appropriate level of the European Qualifications Framework. There is an idealised typical course plan available. The order of curricular elements supports learners' progression. The assessments methods are designed to match the learning outcomes. Nevertheless, the description of the intended learning outcomes in some of the courses is relatively broad and un-specific. Therefore, it is unclear, how the Department of History can check their appropriateness through evaluations, graduate surveys, and/or feedback from the labour market. It is also not transparent how the intended learning outcomes are updated according to current developments in the academic field and labour market. **[Finding 5]**

The structure of the BA is stable and can be further developed in the future to give students more room for personal development and coverage to deepen some research methodological and writing skills, especially in dealing with historical manuscripts and oral history. Students are open-minded and would like to follow up with the study opportunities that the department offers. Also, the designed curriculum is intended to be a baseline to determine course outcomes yet the faculty members, as the panel of experts gleaned from the discussions during the site visit, have a certain degree of freedom to decide how to conduct the instruction in their classes as long as their students continue to meet course level outcomes.

Academic depth of the programme is evident, as the faculty members are enthusiastic to develop and update it constantly. Learning support is given by faculty and the programme is well established and offers also an academic advisory system. The programme has a sound academic focus, but the panel of experts expect students to read academic literature at an early stage and in later years, they should be able to critically analyse it and write coherent arguments based on the literature. Bibliographies of the literature attached to course description should, however, be updated with more focus on recent publications, especially those written in English. **[Finding 4]**

The structure and content of courses support the achievement of the objectives and intended learning outcomes of the study programme. Different parts of the study programme are coherent, however, students should be encouraged to select electives in order to deepen their knowledge on a specific historical epoch or subject. **[Finding 6]** The programme has appropriate objectives for either preparing students for employment (mostly in the public sector) or preparation for further study at MA level.

To make the BA programme more attractive, an option could be created whereby students can select "minor programmes" offered by departments in other colleges (e.g. law, economics); other

options could be to widen research topics and to strengthen competencies which could be of interest/relevance for the labour market. **[Finding 7]**

A final semester grade is based on continuous assessment throughout the semester as well as a final examination. There is no final thesis requested in the design of the BA programme at SQU. The panel of experts discussed the level of exams with teaching staff and students and have no concerns that the intended level of qualification has been achieved after completing the programme.

The student admission process in the programme does not have separate quotas for males and for females. Diversity is taken into consideration during recruitment procedures. The University offers financial help to all admitted students.

SQU has a system to assign a certain number of credits directly related to the expected workload to the courses. The total programme workload is allocated to the different courses. The workload system used by SQU refers to the national regulations and differs from the workload system used in Europe.

For future accreditation procedures (reaccreditation) curricular modifications should be documented in a transparent manner and it should be shown how the changes contribute to an improvement in programme quality.

#### *Master Programme*

The Master programme at SQU has the potential of becoming an outstanding institution of higher learning in the area of Omani and Gulf Studies due to the unique combination of available data, strategic location and expertise of faculty. However, at present there are some serious shortcomings:

- For one, the Master programme does not have a clear profile. According to staff questioning there are two areas of specialization: Omani history and culture and Islamic civilization, both modern and classic. Yet, the listing of course titles remains very vague as to the actual topic of instruction. Here, a closer focus is needed in one or however many areas of specialization are to be offered with a clear curriculum of courses building up on one another. **[Finding 8]** In the discussion with students and alumni, this was one major point of criticism, the fact that the Master programme was in some points a reproduction of the Bachelor programme with no clear focal research points.
- Further, a stronger emphasis on dealing critically with historical texts is needed. So far, all Master theses focus too much on collecting data. Historical research, however, should not only consist of the accumulation of data and specialized knowledge but also of a critical reading of these data utilizing relevant analytical and methodological approaches. These can further be enhanced by allowing for more interdisciplinary approaches and awareness of the intellectual contexts of history in their relationship to other fields of study. Therefore, it is recommended to open up the admission to the Master programme to other field of studies and to encourage international students to come to SQU. In this context, a linkage with the Center of Omani Studies at SQU may be recommended. Also, the important pre-Islamic era should be included in the curriculum. **[Finding 9]**
- The panel of experts also recommends to involve students to a larger extent. **[Finding 10]** This should be in the form of seminar-based teaching involving students in the conceptualization and preparation of study themes. In addition, students can be involved in the faculty's on-going research projects to familiarize them with research methods and projects in progress. Thus, it may be ensured to educate students to become future

scholars in addition to future teachers and civil servants which seems to be the major qualification goal so far.

### *PhD Programme*

The PhD programme which should be the linchpin and pride of every department is not clearly outlined in the Department of History at SQU. There are defined objectives and intended learning outcomes provided in the SER, but they are relatively short and broad. Due to conflicting information given in the SER and the site visit, it was not possible for the panel of experts to form a clear picture of this programme and to assess it in depth. A revision of the programme as a whole (structure, courses and methodological training) is recommended to make it comply with international standards. **[Finding 11]**

The panel of experts recognizes the potential of the PhD programme to become a unique centre for research of Omani and Arab History. SQU therefore has to elaborate on the target of the programme and the research orientation has to become much clearer. The panel of experts appreciates the effort of graduates to gather information regarding a certain topic of research – this was obvious when the experts looked at the PhD theses provided during the site visit. But to become a lighthouse of research in the Arab world a more modern approach towards research is needed. So far it seems to serve mostly as a qualification tool for further promotion in the civil service.

Due to a lack of information given in the SER the panel of experts is not able to assess the indicators of accreditation. There is no clear picture if doctoral graduates have a systematic understanding of their research discipline and are able to master all the skills and methods which are used in their research field. The Department of History must provide new documents which demonstrate how the graduates of the PhD programme contribute - through their research work – to an original piece of research which extends the confines of knowledge and which holds up to national or international scrutiny. SQU must also show that instrumental competence (to identify and solve new problems in the areas of research, development and/or innovation in a specialised academic field) can be gained in the programme as well as systemic competences (to carry out the critical analysis, development and synthesis of new and complex ideas).

A colloquium to ensure a platform for PhD students to present and discuss their research projects has to be established, as well as a guarantee for international access – not only in terms of available literature but also in terms of presenting the findings in English or any other relevant language to the research area. **[Finding 12]** Therefore, it is recommended to encourage students to publish their dissertation in English or at least to present a ten-page summary in English to ensure international reception. **[Finding 13]**

### *Labour orientation of the programmes*

The BA programme aims to provide the labour market with history graduates, with a special focus on Ministry of Education Schools (“MoE”). Such qualification is mainly needed in teaching, and to an extent in tourism and culture-related jobs. However, outside the MoE, Ministry of Culture and Heritage, and Ministry of Tourism, there is not sufficient demand for such specialty in the private or public sectors that warrants the current number of intakes. Moreover, the existing learning outcomes do not focus on transferable skills which would make history graduates more employable or competitive. Currently there are no bridging tracks between academic qualifications, such as BA in History, and professions, such as journalists, consultants, copywriters, etc.

MA and PhD programmes provide an avenue for career promotion with little focus on expanding research and analytical skills. Both programmes are content driven. Similar to the BA programme, most of the intake is associated with the MoE. Contrary to other similar departments in the SQU and other higher education institutions, there is no institutional mechanism through which stake-



holders or future employers contribute to the design of the BA or MA programmes nor the PhD research interests. This has led to limited training and internship opportunities for students.

The Department should develop a concept on how the interlinkage with the labour market could be strengthened (e.g. via exchange on needed skills and QA as well as via internships) **[Finding 14]** To develop a specific profile of the MA and PhD programme which focusses on research skills as well as on the needs of the labour market could contribute onto the growth or evolution of the Department of History.

## Conclusion

The criteria are partly fulfilled. The following areas need to be remedied:

1. The course descriptions must be revised. Subject-specific and cross-disciplinary intended learning outcomes must be described in greater detail so that their appropriateness can be checked by stakeholders. Bibliographies of the literature attached to course descriptions should be updated, focussing more on recent publications, especially those written in English.
2. Students should be able to select “minor programmes” offered by departments in other colleges (e.g. law, economics) to widen the topics of research and to strengthen competencies which could be attractive for the labour market.
3. A pool of courses should be introduced from which students are free to select electives for deepening their knowledge on a specific historical epoch.
4. To improve the international learning experience of students the Department should strengthen the exchange with foreign universities and try to invite more international students.
5. A concept should be developed on how to strengthen the interlinkage with the labour market.

## 3. Learning, Teaching and Assessment of Students

### Standards BA/MA programme:

*The delivery of material encourages students to take an active role in the learning process. Students are assessed using accessible criteria, regulations, and procedures, which are made readily available to all participants and which are applied consistently. Assessment procedures are designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. [ESG 1.3]*

### Description

#### *Learning and teaching methods*

The SER describes that faculty members use a range of learning and teaching approaches. The learning objectives are achieved through the following approaches: A) using technologies to enhance students' learning methods. Moodle and PowerPoint presentations are used by some faculty members and an interactive e-learning platform is in place. B) using lecturing, C) using films and maps.

### *Student numbers*

The Department of History provided some data on students and graduates per cohort and gender as well as data on students per “minor subject”.

Between 2010 and 2016 the overall student number in the BA programme was 307 (205 female and 102 male students). Between 2010 and 2017 286 students graduated (178 female, 108 male).

The number of students in the MA programme between 2011 and 2017 was 38 (29 female, 9 male). The number of graduates between 2010 and 2017 was 50 (34 female, 16 male).

The number of students in the PhD programme between 2010 and 2017 was 26 (12 female, 14 male). The number of graduates between 2015 and 2018 was 7 (3 female, 4 male).

### *Assessment of students*

SQU has a detailed Undergraduate Academic Assessment Policy in place to ensure the provision of fair assessment and grading, which aims to provide: a) a framework for governance of student assessment, b) a framework to align assessment methods with learning outcomes, c) clear guidelines to assure quality of assessment and marking and d) a framework for grade moderation and grade approval processes.

Some of the following main principles constitute the bases of this policy:

- Assessment should be linked to course learning outcomes and objectives.
- Assessment methods used should be appropriate to the outcomes being assessed.
- Assessment should address different levels of attainment, including knowledge, comprehension and higher cognitive skills, psychomotor skills, and behaviour.
- Standard setting should be criterion-based rather than norm-referenced.
- Marking should be accurate and consistent and based on pre-defined criteria.
- Assessment should enhance student learning.
- Students should be aware of assessment criteria at the beginning of the course.
- Feedback should be timely, meaningful, and helpful.
- Assessment should be commensurate with the workload of the course.

The regulations of SQU define that no single component of a course examination may exceed 60% of the final grade. Where there is a final examination, it must be comprehensive and account for 40-60% of the final grade. Assessment tasks should be of reasonable length. No examination shall be longer than three hours. As much as possible, questions should assess higher-order thinking and not just simple recall of information. To differentiate between low and high ability students, assessment tasks should take into account student abilities and educational development, hence questions of multiple abilities in examinations should be provided (ranging from easy to more difficult).

CASS has an Examination Unit which acts as a reference center for all matters that relate to College examinations. It is managed by the Examination Unit Head who reports to the Dean.

SQU has a detailed Student Academic Misconduct Policy which aims to ensure the integrity of the University and academic awards.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU offers students many ways to accomplish their courses. Common types of exams are multiple choice or academic essays. In every class it is the teacher's responsibility to set up the type of

test students have to take. Therefore, students are fully informed by the teacher about the exams and the assessments at the beginning of every semester.

A shortcoming pointed out by students and repeatedly remarked by the experts on all occasions is the apparent lack of English, in teaching, readings and application. This is also a surprise because the criteria for admittance to the programmes require a defined level of abilities in English. Unfortunately, it seems that the access to non-Arabic sources and academic texts at SQU is very limited, but in the academic world, internationally and interdisciplinary, English is the common language. This leads to a lack of advanced reading and academic writing skills in English for the students which will not allow them to compete in the international academic world or job market. Furthermore, good skills in using the English language in terms of writing, reading and speaking are the most claimed requirements by the Omani labour market. Postgraduates from SQU confirmed that without good knowledge of the English language there are very few opportunities to get a well-paid job in Oman. Thus, English should be utilized more in teaching courses but also students should be encouraged to use English literature and sources for their Master theses which display a gaping lack of adequate and recent literature in English. **[Finding 13]**

In order to allow students to practice and improve their English the University could implement summer trainings. On top of that students could be in closer contact and cooperate with museums and institutions while they are doing summer training. By this, students will feel more and more secure using English as the work environmental language.

There are no doubts that assessment regulations and procedures are defined and made readily available in published form to students at SQU. The programme design of the BA ensures that every student is familiarised with a spectrum of examination types over the course of their studies. Examination requirements are transparent and made known to the students. Nevertheless, it would be beneficial for the students, if there was the possibility to choose between an academic essay or a written test for examination. An alternative type of examination could be in form of oral exams. This would set up a new type of examination at SQU and would train students at expressing and explaining historical topics.

SQU has in place regulations for students with disabilities and the Department of History seems to address needs of students in special life situations on an individual level. It is not clear if there is a specific concept or policy in place to ensure that teaching and learning methods respect and cater to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths.

Responsibilities and structures related to the organisation of exams are clearly defined at SQU. The timing of exams is organised appropriately and examination dates are announced in a timely manner. Suitable opportunities to re-sit an exam are offered as necessary. During the site visit there were no complaints from students.

It is unclear for the panel of experts if long-term data regarding the number of failed course/module examinations in the study programmes are used for evaluation and to improve the programmes. At SQU grading scales are in use.

At SQU students receive a methodological education in working with historical sources. Which methods are taught is individually up to the teachers in the classroom. They are fully responsible for their methods, but there is no general didactic system which states how students are methodologically trained. Overall, there is a strong demand from students to have more access to different types of historical sources to train their methodological skills and special courses for analysing historical materials. This could be achieved by using more unedited source materials in class. On a general level, methods of teaching and learning seem to be appropriate to and correspond to the intended learning outcomes at the BA level.

The teaching level of the MA and PhD courses do not seem appropriate, because there seems to be no distinction between the didactical and methodological MA level of the lectures and the BA level. It is rather a continuation of the BA than a development of new methodological skills of the students. There is an urgent request, especially by the current BA and MA students, to introduce new and different types of methodological training in the MA lectures. **[Finding 15]** There are MA lectures without exams which could be taken as an opportunity for implementing new methods.

The PhD programme includes three courses. PhD students have to study them but there is no assessment of the course results. It is unclear on the basis of which criteria students have to take the courses. The PhD seems not to have a clear curricular structure. Therefore, it is not possible for the panel of experts to evaluate the criteria for the PhD programme.

### **Conclusion:**

The criteria are partly fulfilled. The following areas need to be remedied:

Overall, the system of teaching and assessment at SQU is functioning. Nevertheless, there are some severe shortcomings which are mentioned above and which should be addressed by the Department of History, especially the aspect of English language skills and the training of methodology.

## **4. Student Admission, Progression, Recognition and Certification**

Standards BA/MA programme:

*Consistently applied, pre-defined, published regulations are in place which cover student admission, progression, recognition, and certification.*

*[ESG 1.4]*

Standards PhD programme:

*The relevant formal criteria such as admission requirements and procedures, examination conditions and the award of the degree are described and have been published.*

### **Description**

*Admission*

*For the BA programme:*

Upon admission to the College of Arts and Social Sciences, students are registered in general arts. They have to fulfil the requirements of the Foundation Programme (FP) and must exit with IT, Math and English skills at level 4. They then take introductory courses in History and other subjects in the general arts depending on their interests. Admission into the Department of History is based on the following criteria: a) students' interest, b) availability of places in each department and c) evaluating student performance.

In the SER SQU describes that in the first lecture of the semester, staff members distribute the course syllabus to the students. The syllabus includes a short course description, objectives, outputs, topics, teaching methods, assessment of student performance, references e.g. books, journal papers, websites etc. Through this plan, the staff member explains the assessment mechanism and grading distribution method.

*For the Master programme:*

The Department of History started to offer a Master programmes for full-time and part-time students in 2001. Applicants must have a Bachelor degree in History from Sultan Qaboos University, or any other recognized University. Applicants from other disciplines can apply, but may be required to take some courses specified by the department. In addition, practical experience can be taken into consideration. A Cumulative Grade Point Average of not less than 2.75 on a 4 point scale or equivalent - the Deanship of Postgraduate Studies will make the assessment for equivalency acceptance. Work experience is a must for candidates with Cumulative Grade Point Average between 2.74 and 2.5 in the Bachelor's degree. Applicants must pass the written test and interview held by the department. Before starting the programme the applicant should achieve a defined level of English language skills (e.g. TOEFL test).

*For the PhD Programme:*

The Department of History started to offer the PhD programme for full-time students in 2011. Applicants should have a Master degree in History from Sultan Qaboos University, or any other recognized University. Applicants from other related disciplines can apply to the programme, but may be required to take some courses specified by the department. A Cumulative Grade Point Average of not less than 3.00 on a 4.00 point scale or equivalent in any other system and the Deanship of Postgraduate Studies will make the assessment for equivalency acceptance. Applicants must have been full-time students for 4 years (Master). Applicants should submit a statement on the objectives and goals of the research proposed. Three letters of reference, at least 2 from academics, to show competence in the discipline of interest and research capabilities. Applicants must have computer skills and should pass the written test and interview held in the department (if necessary). Before starting the programme the applicant should achieve a defined level in an international accepted test of English language skills.

*Progression*

The SER describes that student performance in the courses is assessed using three components: midterm exam (20 to 25 percent), final exam (50-60 percent), class work, e.g. research conducted by the student, or a presentation on a certain topic (20-25 percent). The assessment tools can be increased in some courses to four or five components, depending on the nature of the course and the teacher's philosophy.

The SER describes that the academic advising process is responsible for the implementation of the study plan of a BA in History. The student and academic advisor are primarily responsible to follow the study plan. One problem is that students enrol in courses without getting advice from their academic advisor which can lead to confusion in the student's plan, and in some cases may force the student to stay an additional semester. Nevertheless, in general most of the students seem to follow their study plan.

The SER describes that punctuality and commitment to attend classes is the responsibility of the student. Failure to attend classes without prior notice or reason will have its consequences. Course instructors should keep attendance records.

According to the information in the SER students are allowed to participate with faculty members in research projects supported by internal or external grants. On a national level the Research Council set up a Faculty-Mentored Undergraduate Research Award Programme (FURAP) scholarships to support undergraduate final year project. In April 2015 a decree was issued by SQU allowing undergraduate students to be totally funded for participating in international, regional or domestic conferences.

### *Recognition*

The process of transferring students from the Department of History to other departments or to other colleges is subject to mechanisms laid down by the college. Students must fulfil the Dean-ship of Admission and Registration requirements (14 credit hours in their respective specialization + a minimum 2.3 GPA). In all cases, the substitution process does not take place without the approval of the academic advisor, Head of the Department, Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies, and the admission and registration deanship. CASS implemented a new regulation for the substitution of courses, namely, that the student must get all approvals for substituting a course before he/she begins the study of the alternative course.

### *Graduation Requirements*

Successful completion of all courses is the core requirement for graduation from the department and obtaining a Bachelor degree of History. Students should have completed the curriculum requirements of their degree programme with a minimum graduation and major average of 2.00.

SQU has detailed postgraduate academic regulations regarding programmes, admission, registration, withdrawal, postponement, extension, probation, comprehensive examination, thesis defence, and graduation.

Sultan Qaboos University follows a credit system whereby students' progress towards graduation in their College/Major through studying a specific number of credits in each semester that count toward the total number of credits required for graduation in their particular College.

The SER describes that the Department of History maintains contact with its graduates, albeit personal; however, the department is in the process of designing and distributing an alumni feedback survey. The Department of History has formed an alumni committee in 2017 which consists of the Head of the Department and two other faculty members. The aim of the alumni committee is to foster and nurture a bond between the institute and its ex-students and to provide networking opportunities for current and former students.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

The selection procedure for the study programme follows defined criteria and procedures that are publicly available. On a formal level a lot of information required to apply for the programme, to take exams or to graduate are available at SQU. The Department of History provides all students who want to study history at BA level with information about the specific study programme. For the MA programme the admission criteria remained unclear to the panel of experts, besides a required BA degree in History. It should be avoided to evoke the impression, that normally only students for the MA course are accepted who also received the BA degree at SQU. The requirements for admission seem to be very formal and less oriented towards the competencies of the applicants and future students. It would be advisable to publish specific prerequisites relevant for every individual study programme which reflect substantive competencies needed for a successful completion of the programme and which are included in the published admissions criteria. This would also help to inform students who graduated from a different University and would like to apply for the MA course at SQU. There is also no transparent information given about the possibility for MA graduates who graduated from other universities in Oman or abroad to be accepted as PhD students in the Department of History at SQU. Unfortunately, there is no information given about the possibility for international students to apply for a higher degree level (MA or PhD). SQU needs to restructure and revise the information for admittance to the BA, MA and especially the PhD programme so that interested students know beforehand which criteria must be fulfilled to enter the programmes. **[Finding 16]**

An obstacle for recognition of study achievement at other universities might also be that the Credit Point System used by SQU and which is approved on a national level is not aligned with the European Credit Point System (ECTS). It is recommended that SQU introduces a table which helps students and universities abroad to align both systems so that recognition becomes easier. **[Finding 17]** Regulations for recognition of Higher Education Qualifications exist on a general level at SQU but due to a lack of national regulations, defined criteria for recognition of previous periods of study, and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are not in place. All regulations which are in place at SQU (e.g. undergraduate study regulations) are also documented in legally binding form.

Graduates from SQU receive a diploma, generally explaining the qualification they gained. This document neither gives a detailed explanation about the skills of the graduate, nor does it show competencies the students might have gained in additional courses. The panel of experts recommend to introduce a document which students receive on graduation which gives detailed information on the objectives of the study programme as well as on all competencies the student acquired during his/her studies (e.g. Diploma Supplement). This document would not only be helpful for the student who might wish to continue studies at another university but might also be helpful for future employers who get more transparent information on the qualification of the graduate. **[Finding 18]**

#### **Conclusion:**

The criteria are partly fulfilled. The following areas need to be remedied:

- On a formal level some relevant information is provided but the admission requirements are not shown to support the objectives of the study programme. The admission requirements have to be adjusted.
- The transparency of information on recognition and competencies gained at graduation should be improved. A new document which describes the competencies of the graduates transparently should be developed.
- The credit point systems used at SQU and in Europe should be aligned which could also foster exchange between universities.

#### **5. Teaching Staff**

##### Standards BA/MA programme:

*The composition (quantity, qualifications, professional and international experience, etc.) of the staff is appropriate for the achievement of the intended learning outcomes.*

*Staff involved with teaching is qualified and competent to do so.*

*Transparent procedures are in place for the recruitment and development of the staff. [ESG 1.5]*

##### Standards PhD programme:

*The qualification of supervisory staff (m/f) is appropriate to ensure that doctoral students are supervised at the correct academic level.*

*The personnel are sufficient in number to safeguard supervision arrangements on the doctoral programme.*

*The remit of supervisors is clear and transparent.*

## Description

SQU included a table in the SER showing the detailed faculty qualifications and research interest for the Department of History for the academic year, 2016-2017.

Rank	Research Interest
HoD, Assistant Professor	Oman Islamic History, Islamic history, Physical and cultural heritage
Associate Professor	History of Oman and the modern Gulf states, History of the Ottoman Empire. Editing manuscripts, History of international relations and organizations, Diplomatic history, Folk and material heritage, Customs, traditions and social norms, Contemporary Women's Issues
Associate Professor	History of Oman in ancient times, History of ancient Yemen, History of the Arabs before Islam
Associate Professor	Modern and contemporary Arab history, Economic and social history, History of the modern and contemporary world
Associate Professor	History of the Islamic State, Editing the Islamic heritage, Aspects of cultural history in Oman
Assistant Professor	Modern Contemporary History
Assistant Professor	History of Oman, History of the Arab Orient, science of agriculture in Islamic civilization, Editing Arabic manuscripts
Assistant Professor	History of the Age of Prophecy, Abbasid era
Assistant Professor	Modern Oman history
Assistant Professor	Modern History
Assistant Professor	Islamic history of Oman and the history of Ibadi presence in the Islamic Maghreb, Ibadi political thought, Omani heritage issues

According to the SER, SQU follows the policy to recruit highly qualified Omanis. The best graduates of the University are appointed as demonstrators and sent abroad to study for their Master and PhD degrees before their appointment as Assistant Professors. There are Executive Regulations which specify the qualifications, experience and expertise of academic staff appropriate for employment.

The recruitment procedure for international staff starts with an advertisement posted on the SQU website. The Recruitment Committee of each Department submits a shortlist to the College Recruitment Committee (CRC). The CRC invite shortlisted candidates to deliver seminars and attend interviews at the College and the shortlisted candidates are submitted to the University Faculty Recruitment Committee (UFRC) which is chaired by the DVCAACS. Recommendations of the UFRC are submitted to the Vice Chancellor for final approval.

### *Staff Development*

According to the SER, both academic and non-academic staff members are allowed to participate in fully sponsored international conferences, workshops and training courses. In the SER it is laid down that Omani staff members are also allowed to have a sabbatical leave for research purposes. Academics are encouraged to be part of research teams for funded projects and consultancies as well as any other related research and community service activities.

The SER describes that the University provides opportunities for faculty professional development to improve staff skills that enhance teaching quality. In-house workshops are offered by the Centre for Education Technology (CET) and Centre for Information Systems (CIS). The CET and CIS also support teaching with media equipment and e-learning services. The Centre for Excellence in



Teaching and Learning was established to support, advance learning and teaching, and exchange good practices across the University.

Total student credits are used to calculate the full-time equivalent (FTE). The maximum teaching load for each faculty member in the Department of History is 12 hours. In 2010, the University started an appraisal system for teaching staff to provide quantitative and qualitative data on teaching starting from the Faculty through the Department and then the College. The University operates Annual Best Teacher awards to promote good teaching practice.

In 2015, the University introduced new Academic Promotion Regulations. The regulations define competencies for university teaching and learning equivalent to those for research. This includes scholarship in university teaching and learning. So, faculty will be rewarded when they treat University teaching and learning in a manner commensurate to research.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

There is teaching staff with adequate qualifications to achieve the objectives and planned learning outcomes of the study programme, and to ensure quality and sustainability of teaching and learning. Overall student assessment on teaching skills of the teaching staff is positive. Teaching staff collaborate in the fields of teaching and research within the Department and CASS and some of them with partners outside Oman. Although teaching staff is routinely engaged in professional and teaching-skills development, the efforts to strengthen this aspect should continue (see below). Assessment takes into account the quality of their teaching as well as of their research and further professional development. They have principal responsibility for developing and delivering their segment of the curriculum. The faculty management systems of work load allocation, performance appraisal, promotion, etc. are organized and appropriate. The staff team is agile and responsive to students' needs. There is a strong sense that staff has a clear mission and commitment to respond to national priorities and opportunities while striving to be at the forefront in the field of History in Oman and the Gulf countries.

The faculty size and subject mix is appropriate for the BA programme in history. Foreign visiting members of the teaching staff participate now and again in teaching the study programme. There is no doubt that the qualification of associate lecturers involved in the programme are checked and their lectures are part of the QA procedures of the Department. Lecturers are made familiar with the requirements of the programme.

The Department is looking forward to appoint good quality teaching staff, especially of full professor ranks. There is an intention in filling positions as there seems to be a continuity plan in place and a continuous hiring practice to enhance diversity among the faculty. In the accreditation period some positions will expire and SQU is aware that these staff members have to be replaced. Recruitments procedures of SQU were explained during the site visit and seem to be transparent.

Most of the faculty is research active, but most of their publications are in Arabic and focused on Omani history and published in qualified journals. The faculty seems to be adequate to meet the teaching requirements of the programme portfolio and to carry out research although there is a potential risk of a fall in research output due to their teaching loads. The panel of experts recommends to consider a bundle of measures to ensure that research in the Department of History takes place on a high level in the future and strengthens the unique position of the Department in the academic world **[Finding 19]:**

- SQU should explore incentive systems to reward distinguished faculty members on the basis of teaching and research merits.

- Moreover, SQU could increase financial and logistical support for faculty to conduct more research activities / projects.
- Lessening bureaucratic procedures that hinder the academic promotion process at the department / University, as such procedures take a long time and exhaust or decrease the research interest and enthusiasm among faculty members.
- SQU should cultivate opportunities for staff to establish research groups within the department or across departments within the College of Arts and Social Sciences or other departments in the University to improve the culture of multidisciplinary research.

Faculty staff is engaged in teaching developments and highly committed to the department programmes and their students. However, teaching tends to be traditional and there seemed to be limited pedagogical development. Meanwhile, students are satisfied with the majority of the staff's skills. Students from different programmes and levels emphasized their direct, informal contacts with staff.

### Conclusion:

The criteria are partly fulfilled. The following areas need to be remedied:

- Continuing development opportunities for all academic staff and faculty should be offered. Procedures should be in place to ensure and/or develop appropriate didactic qualifications of teaching staff. Pedagogic approaches which are of a very interactive and cooperative learning nature should be used more. **[Finding 20]**
- To strengthen the visibility and the exchange of the Department a more intense use of English (and other languages beside Arab) among the faculty is recommended (see above).
- Measures should be taken by the university to ensure and to expand research activities of the Department of History (see above).
- Improving the IT skills of the faculty especially in the field of Digital Humanities that can be tailored to the needs of teaching and research on history. This could be done voluntarily, based on individual choices.

## 6. Learning Resources and Student Support

### Standards BA/MA programme:

*Appropriate facilities and resources are available for learning and teaching activities.*

*Guidance and support is available for students to advise on achieving successful completion of their studies. [ESG 1.6]*

### Standards PhD programme:

*There is a research environment in place which facilitates the relevant research and fosters the qualification which is necessary for a future research career inside academia or outside an academic context.*

*Doctoral students have access to access to an appropriate infrastructure.*

*Sufficient and suitable guidance and supervisory systems are in place.*

## **Description**

The construction of the campus of SQU include teaching classrooms, lecture theatres, conference halls, libraries, staff and student residences with separate male and female sport facilities, accommodation for students with special needs, staff and student recreational facilities, and the SQU hospital. The newly established SQU Cultural Centre houses the University's main library, the Omani Studies Centre, a lecture hall and the Grand Hall with a seating capacity of 5,000.

SQU explains in the SER that in financial terms it is a free University. No fees are paid by the students as all undergraduate academic services are for free. All students additionally receive a monthly financial allowance to ensure their ability to focus on education without any financial constraints. Moreover, they receive daily meals as well as in-campus transportation. All female students as well as male students with special needs are allowed to live inside the campus where five residential complexes are available. In certain cases, students can ask for an additional financial support.

The Department budget is part of the College central budget and Department financial requests go through the College central budget for approval. According to the SER, the Department of History has no concerns that there is an absence of a separate budget for each department. Offices include administrative offices, clerical offices and faculty offices. Faculty members either have their own offices or share office space.

There are three buildings in which lectures are held: College of Arts and Social Sciences and some classrooms in other buildings. Each of the classrooms in the other buildings is equipped with a desktop, an overhead projector, a TV and an LCD projector.

There are 3 computer labs in the college that the programme students are allowed to use in addition to another 4 computer labs in the other blocks. The labs in the college are equipped with desktop computers, LCD projectors, and printers. The College has 4 technical staff members who support all employees in addition to maintaining 11 different labs. The University has invested in Moodle II, a course management system used to deliver course content and host online learning activities. Classrooms and offices are hard wired to the network. Wireless network also exists. At the end of each semester, the Department sends its suggestions and requirement to the college administration regarding any needs in tools, equipment, or even computing software. The students and faculty can write or ask the HoD, in case there is a need for equipment.

The programme students are allowed to use the college library or the main library. Both libraries provide collections into the area of the programme. The collection of the main library is much bigger than the college library, however. The library systems allow the students to borrow 5 books for 3 weeks which are renewable. If an item is not available in the library, the student or the staff can ask for an interlibrary loan. The staff and student can even ask for collections not available to be added to the library by writing a request letter proving the importance of the item for the programme collection. Many of the items are available online and the faculty, staff, and students can access those collections at any time. Both libraries, the college and main library, have adequate resources related to the programme in addition to numerous electronic resources related to the programme which are accessible at any time.

### *Student Consultancy*

The student counselling centre provides a comprehensive programme of support services to assist students in their adjustment to University life. Counsellors at the centre practice under international counselling guidelines and code of ethics.

Academic advising provides students with information and guidance so that they may take responsibility for their programme and achieve their academic objectives. The advising process starts with an orientation programme where new students meet the Dean, Heads of the Departments, and Faculty Members. Then, students are assigned to academic advisors (faculty members) from her/his major Department. Students normally visit their academic advisors during each semester's pre-registration period to seek advice regarding the upcoming semester's courses. Each advisor sets advising hours every week during which advisees can visit for advice, e.g. to verify the student's choice of courses and to assist the student in exploring alternative paths to the degree if, for any reason, the normal pace of the degree is disrupted. The academic advisors follow up with their student's proposed registration each semester and help develop a recovery plan for students, if needed.

Student problems that cannot be resolved by the academic advisors are referred to the Assistant Dean for Undergraduate Studies. In addition to academic matters, an academic advisor may offer advice on personal issues that affect the academic performance of the student.

### **Experts' Evaluation**

SQU as a state university is free of charge for Omani students, no fees are paid and accommodation, meals and transport services are also provided free of charge. The campus is very large and cannot be managed without University transportation. Classroom size was said to not exceed 30 which is adequate. The impression of the facilities is that they are adequate and sometimes excellent, such as staff offices, lecture halls and computer rooms.

There is a central library on campus which can be used by students of history as well as a departmental library. The panel of experts had the opportunity to visit the impressive central library of SQU. A brief glance in the academic literature in the area of history, however, evoked the impression, that books and sources provided are a bit out-dated and need to be revised accordingly. Some standard references seemed to be missing entirely. The panel of experts recommend to update the literature in history and to also include academic books in foreign languages. **[see Finding 4]**

Course descriptions for the Bachelor and Master programme were provided in the appendix of the SER ("course syllabi") and they are available to students. These documents contain the intended learning outcomes, methods of learning and teaching, assessment methods, and the expected workload. Where on a formal level all information is available, the quality of the course descriptions differs a lot. Some intended learning outcomes are described in a very broad way so that it is impossible to check if the objectives have been reached at the end of the course. Therefore, the course descriptions must be revised for the Bachelor and the Master programme (see above).

Due to the broad description of the objectives of the courses the panel of experts cannot assess if there is an overlap of the content of the courses. On an organisational level the Department of History has measures defined to ensure that course offerings are coordinated on both content and organisational levels to avoid overlap. On the basis of the information provided, the panel of experts cannot assess precisely if the programme is implemented in such a way that students are able to complete their studies within the expected period of time as defined in the curriculum. There is no evidence that this is not the case.

The overall aspect of student consultancy and student support was checked by the panel of experts and seems to be in a good condition: introductory offerings are available for new and potential students. Institutionalised student advisory services are available to students at SQU and on the departmental level. These services are offered consistently and information on these services is made available to students in an adequate way. Individualised advising is available for students

and teaching staff members offer frequent consultation hours and are available to students. Due to the low number of exchange students / incoming students the panel of experts cannot assess this aspect but there are mechanisms in place to support these students at SQU in general.

During the site visit the panel of experts was informed by the faculty that usually one professor supervises not more than five Master theses and PhD dissertations which seems to be adequate. Students testified that they felt well informed by their professors and sufficiently supervised and professors being accessible. However, there was a lack of communication when it came to the dissemination of information about conferences and research projects. Also, there seems to be a demand for practical experience and information regarding job skills to ease the transition into the labour market.

## Conclusion

The criteria are partly fulfilled. The following areas need to be remedied: a concept for a process and a timeline must be provided how the academic literature of History will be updated in the central library. The course descriptions must be revised (see details above).

## 7. Information

### Standards BA/MA programme:

*Data is collected from relevant sources and stakeholders, analysed, and used for the effective management and continuous enhancement of the programme. [ESG 1.7]*

*Impartial and objective, up-to-date information regarding the programme and its qualifications is published regularly. This published information is appropriate for and available to relevant stakeholders. [ESG 1.8]*

## Description

The Quality Assurance Office has established a system of data collection to develop quality Assurance Key Performance Indicators (KPIs). The College Annual Performance Report (CAPR) focuses on the strategic direction of the College and its alignment with the University mission, objectives and Strategic Plan. The report includes sections on: evaluation of College strategy and targets, teaching and learning, research and consultancy, community service, resources and facilities and risk management. The CAPR is discussed and approved by the College Board before submission.

The production and reporting path follows: College CAPR considered by College Board, College submits CAPR to the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Community Service, the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Community Service forwards the CAPR to the Director of the Quality Assurance Office, the Quality Assurance Office produces a general report which is submitted to the Vice Chancellor's office.

CASS publishes a yearly report based on a compilation of the Department's Annual report. This report includes detailed information about activities, achievements and initiatives in teaching and learning, research and community services within the College.

## Experts' Evaluation

The Department is increasingly aware of the importance of data collection and analysis when it comes to ascertaining employability of the BA and MA graduates. However, outside the Ministries of Education, Heritage and Culture, and Tourism, the information on the labour market require-

ments are not collected and analysed at the Departmental level. Hence, no clear and comprehensible description of potential employment fields for graduates is available. Similarly, information on the sectors in which graduates are employed and on how many graduates continue in further education programmes (Master-, PhD-programmes etc.) is not readily available nor systematically collected. This situation should be improved significantly and descriptions of potential areas of employment should be provided to the students. **[see Finding 14]**

On a positive note, the Departments, through the Registrar's Office and recently established governmental committees, commenced identifying and collecting information from other relevant sources. Other data sets such as the composition of the student body of the study programme, duration of studies, number of students who do not complete their studies, and the reasons for non-completion are generally available. The analysis of such information is not clearly mandated nor closely followed. No evidence has been presented to suggest that feedback from analysed data can lead to changes in the study programme.

Generally speaking, information is provided to the public either at the departmental, college or University levels. Such information would cover cohort size, gender, stage of completion, etc. They also cover items such as intended learning outcomes, selection procedure, qualifications awarded, and teaching, learning and assessment procedures.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the criteria pertaining to Policy and Procedures for Information are partially, though largely, fulfilled. One key area needs to be remedied: the alumni gap. An alumni unit or programme need to be established within the department or the CASS at large. **[Finding 21]** It should consistently, consciously and systematically collect and analyse data on career progression and employability of the Department's graduates. Such data should be used to inform the courses and programme design either in terms of learning outcomes, content material, teaching media, or assessment methods. Alumni programmes are also useful in creating a sense of pride and collegueship as well as a good source for future funding.

## Recommendations of the panel of experts

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The panel of experts recommends

- to accredit the Bachelor programme with conditions
- to accredit the Master programme with conditions
- to postpone the decision for the PhD programme

offered by Sultan Qaboos University, Oman.

Findings:

1. A concept must be provided on how stakeholders and future employers are to be involved in the design and review of the programmes offered, especially the BA and MA.
2. The Department should develop initiatives to ensure students' participation in the course and faculty evaluation activities (e.g. reflection in teaching sessions, participation in evaluation activities as a prerequisite for graduation). The results of evaluations and QA measures should be shared with stakeholders.
3. A system must be put in place where data is objectively gathered and systematically evaluated and taken into account for the future enhancement of the doctoral programme.
4. Course descriptions must be revised: subject-specific and cross-disciplinary intended learning outcomes must be described in more detail so that their appropriateness can be checked by stakeholders. Bibliographies of the literature attached to course descriptions should be updated with a greater focus on recent publications, especially those written in English.
5. A process must be implemented to ensure that intended learning outcomes are updated according to current developments in the academic field and labour market.
6. Students should be encouraged to create their own profiles by selecting courses from a pool of electives in order to deepen their knowledge on a specific historical epoch.
7. Students should be able to select "minor programmes" offered by departments in other colleges (e.g. law, economics) to widen the topics of research and to strengthen competencies which could be attractive for the labour market.
8. The profile of the MA programme needs to be sharpened. A closer focus is needed in one or more areas of specialization with a clear curriculum of courses building up on one another.
9. In order to strengthen the aspects of up-to date research and methodology the MA programme should also admit students from other fields of studies and encourage international students to come to SQU. In this context, a stronger linkage with the Center of Omani Studies at SQU is recommended. Also, the important pre-Islamic era should be included in the curriculum.
10. Students should be involved to a larger extent into different activities of teaching and research.
11. The PhD programme must be revised (structure, courses and methodological training).
12. A colloquium to ensure a platform for PhD students to present and discuss their research projects has to be established.
13. The language competencies of students in English should be strengthened on all levels. English should be utilized more in teaching courses but also students should be encouraged

to use English literature and sources for their Master theses. PhD students should be encouraged to publish their dissertation in English or at least to present a ten-page summary in English to ensure international receptivity.

14. The Department should develop a concept how to strengthen the interlinkage with the labour market and provide descriptions of potential areas of employment (beside Ministries) to the students.
15. New and different types of methodological training should be introduced in the MA lectures to distinguish more clearly between the competencies students can gain on the BA and MA level.
16. The university needs to restructure and revise the information for admittance to the BA, MA and especially the PhD programme so that interested students know beforehand which criteria must be fulfilled to enter the programmes.
17. A table which helps students and universities abroad to align the national credit point system with the European ECTS systems should be introduced.
18. A document which students receive on graduation which gives detailed information on the target of the study programme as well as on all competencies the student got during his/her studies (e.g. Diploma Supplement) should be introduced.
19. Measures should be taken to ensure that research in the Department of History takes place on a high level in the future (e.g. introducing an incentive system, increasing financial and logistic support, establishing research groups).
20. Continuing staff development opportunities, especially to further develop didactic qualifications should be offered for all academic staff and faculty.
21. An alumni unit or programme needs to be established within the Department or the CASS at large.